



Larry Hogan, Governor · Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor · Dennis R. Schrader, Secretary

**Behavioral Health Administration**

Aliya Jones, M.D., MBA

Deputy Secretary Behavioral Health

55 Wade Ave., Dix Bldg., SGHC

Catonsville, MD 21228

August 5, 2021

Dear Behavioral Health Partners:

I hope everyone is safely enjoying their summer. After the past 17 months of challenges, changes, and stressors due to the pandemic and the disruption we have all experienced, this is not the summer to power through, it is imperative you take some time to unwind. I hope you give yourself permission to rest and relax. You deserve it!

Transitioning into some form of new normal does not come without its trepidations for many people, including the young people in our lives who are unable to be vaccinated, and also in light of the rising delta variant cases. As we said at the start of the pandemic, try to remember that even though there are things outside of our control, there are things that we can all do to ensure we are as safe as possible, which will help to abate the anxieties we may feel. Remember to follow CDC guidelines. Vaccine hesitancy continues to be a significant barrier to our efforts to fully protect ourselves and our entire community. I encourage you all to get vaccinated and encourage those under your care to get vaccinated. You may want to share [information on our website](#) on vaccinations and related webinars. As we know, individuals who have schizophrenia and substance use disorders are especially vulnerable to infection and are at risk for complications and death from COVID-19 and its variants. It is critical that providers facilitate the sharing of accurate information about vaccines and assist their patients/consumers to get vaccinated in whatever ways you can. For information about hosting a vaccine clinic or becoming a vaccinator, please see our latest provider alert [UPDATE: How to Increase COVID-19 Vaccination Acceptance Rates](#). Please share the information we have provided to you about the importance of vaccinations.

While we continue to be responsive to the COVID-19 health crisis, we remain steadfast in our efforts to reduce opioid-related overdoses. The latest data reports have identified continued increases in opioid-related overdose deaths. Opioid related deaths in the first quarter of 2021 reached a new high and were 9.2% higher than 2020 and 15% higher than 2019. BHA is closely reviewing and analyzing this data with our partners, including the Opioid Operational Command Center and the Local Behavioral Health Authorities. The goal is to determine if there are any

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new significant indicators that may help us address these increases, so that we might implement and support more targeted prevention and intervention strategies.

The Data-Informed Risk Mitigation (DORM) report indicates that individuals at greatest risk for overdose are those with dual disorders who are simultaneously receiving mental health and SUD treatment, especially those utilizing inpatient psychiatric treatment and Outpatient Mental Health Centers, plus SUD OP or SUD IOP programs. Patients who fit this profile must have access to needed supports, including naloxone, to prevent overdose. You may want to review the enclosed PDF slide presentation that provides a summary of the DORM demographics and behavioral health outcomes for more details.

Your continued input remains vital to our mission to building community wellness. We welcome any opportunity for shared learning that helps keep us responsive and effective. Feel free to share your comments with us at [bha.inquiries@maryland.gov](mailto:bha.inquiries@maryland.gov).

Your partnership and support are appreciated and continue to validate that together we can overcome any challenge. Thank you!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aliya Jones', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Aliya Jones, M.D., MBA  
Deputy Secretary Behavioral Health